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ABSTRACT

Most of the predominantly Hispanic students at Los Fresnos High School (LFHS), Texas, speak both Spanish and English, qualify for reduced-price or free lunches, and are considered at-risk. LFHS students historically scored poorly on the California Achievement Test and Texas Assessment of Academic Skill, and many dropped out of school when they learned they lacked the necessary English skills to easily complete the required curriculum or pass the state graduation tests. In an effort to make LFHS a high-performing school, school leaders and teachers committed to improving teacher performance and student achievement. They developed a school improvement plan and applied to become a pilot site in "High Schools That Work," a grassroots reform effort, thus gaining access to technical assistance, professional development, and evaluation. School leaders and teachers focused on such things as creating a culture that supported learning, raising graduation requirements, providing professional development, and improving technology. LFHS students' achievement has improved, with fewer students dropping out, more students entering college, fewer students needing remedial courses, and more students completing a challenging high school curriculum. This report examines district support, state policies that supported LFHS' improvement efforts, and how the Southern Regional Education Board helped LFHS. (SM)

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HIGH SCHOOLS THAT WORK

Case Study

Los Fresnos High School

Los Fresnos, Texas

SREB

ED 462 519

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Los Fresnos is a small town in the lower Rio Grande Valley of south Texas. It is about 15 miles north of Brownsville and the Mexican border and about 12 miles west of the Gulf of Mexico. The town is in one of the poorest school districts in Texas, and its economy for decades has been based on agriculture. Two events, however, are changing the economic base of Los Fresnos. First, the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) puts Los Fresnos in the middle of the free trade zone. As a result, many companies have established nearby to facilitate operations between the United States and Mexico. Second, a large tourist trade has developed from nearby South Padre Island's appeal to tourists and "birders." In the last 10 years more hotels and other services have been developed to fill the needs of businesses and tourists. Still, entrenched poverty, high unemployment and low wages remain realities.

Most of the approximately 1,800 students at Los Fresnos High School speak both Spanish and English. Eighty-nine percent of the students are Hispanic. More than 80 percent of LFHS students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The state classifies 70 percent of the school's population as "at-risk."

The need for improvement

In 1991, 1,024 of 1,461 LFHS students scored below the 40th percentile on the California Achievement Test and/or failed all or part of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Such disappointing student performance did not surprise leaders or teachers, who face a highly transient school population each day. Some LFHS students have crossed the border from Mexico to stay with relatives and enroll in the high school in order to perfect their English skills. These students often drop out of school when they learn that they lack the necessary English skills to easily complete the required curriculum or to pass the state graduation tests. Many often move back across the border to their families.

Getting students to think about the future has not been easy. The "Valley" has a tight-knit culture. Graduates don't leave the area; they like to remain close to their families. Most prefer to attend the four-year colleges nearby, such as the University of Texas at Brownsville. But everyone cannot go to the University of Texas.

The growth of high-tech businesses in the area has put pressure on the academic and career/technology programs at LFHS. School leaders say: "In the early 1990s, we did not have a rich or deep curriculum to help our students acquire high-level technical skills. We only had a few traditional programs, such as agriculture, home economics and accounting." The school did not provide students with the high-level skills to pursue careers in the area's growth industries.

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School staff faced another challenge in 1994, when the Texas Education Agency classified Los Fresnos as a low-performing school based on its low achievement in mathematics. It was clear that a school-wide improvement effort would be necessary.

Los Fresnos' strategies for whole-school improvement

By 1992, school leaders and teachers agreed on a commitment to improve teacher performance and student achievement. They developed a school improvement plan and applied to become a pilot site in the state's grass-roots effort to reform education. To get access to technical assistance, professional development and information on their progress in school improvement, school leaders successfully applied to be one of the 12 original *High Schools That Work* sites in Texas in 1993. Some saw an opportunity to use the *HSTW* assessment system in linking their students' low performance to school and classroom practices and in guiding school improvement efforts. School leaders and teachers turned their uphill battle into a labor of love as they focused on several strategies to improve student achievement.

Creating a culture that supports learning

School leaders and teachers realized that they had to create a culture of high expectations to raise performance at the school. Many teachers would have to change their view of what students could do. In 1994, only 37 percent of LFHS teachers indicated on the *HSTW* Teacher Survey that they thought that students pursuing career/technology studies should master content needed for further study. Most teachers did not think that the community would support the school improvement effort. On the 1994 *HSTW* Teacher Survey, only 22 percent of teachers thought that the community supported them in their instructional efforts. Nevertheless, school leaders worked constantly to gain support from teachers and the community, and they took the following actions to address the low achievement:

- raising graduation requirements;
- getting every student to complete a career pathway;
- improving career/technology programs;
- beginning to eliminate low-level classes;
- improving technology;
- motivating students to work hard to meet high expectations;
- creating a sense of shared leadership for improving the school;
- providing professional development;
- expanding guidance and advisement; and
- creating a ninth-grade transition program.

Raising graduation requirements

In 1995 LFHS required students to complete only 21 units to graduate. School leaders raised the requirement to 24½ for the Class of 2003 and plan to increase the requirement to 26½ by 2005. (The high school's requirement exceeds the current state requirement of 22 units to graduate.) Los Fresnos requires students to complete Algebra I, Algebra II and geometry. Students now must complete three units in science — up from two units. These three science courses must be selected from the following: integrated physics/chemistry, college-preparatory biology, college-preparatory chemistry or college-preparatory physics. Raising the graduation requirement to 26½ units will enable LFHS to increase the mathematics and science requirements to four units in each area. The number of required social studies units increased from 2½ for the Class of 1995 to 3½ for the Class of 2003. The Class of 2003 must complete additional courses not required of earlier classes: two units of foreign language, one unit in fine arts, one-half unit in speech, one-half unit in keyboarding and one unit in a technology application. Furthermore, the Class of 2003 must complete 3½ units in one of three types of broad career pathway: mathematics or science; career/technology; or an academic area. Previous graduation requirements allowed students to select 6½ units in elective areas. Students usually took various courses that did not give them much focus in high school.

Getting every student to complete a career pathway

Each LFHS student is expected to complete a challenging academic core and a concentration of 3½ units in a career pathway that will prepare him or her for further learning. The intent is to encourage students to work toward goals that they determine, that interest them and that prepare them for further learning in work or in college. LFHS leaders engaged the help of partners from business, higher education and the community in determining the following career pathways from which students are to choose: environmental and agricultural science; liberal arts; business and marketing; health science technology; human development, management and service; and industrial and engineering technology. Each career pathway combines an academic core with a specific sequence of courses focused on preparing students for further study and work. Career pathways are broad and flexible; students may change pathways as they acquire more knowledge and experience.

Improving career/technology programs

At the heart of Los Fresnos' school improvement effort have been efforts to improve and expand the career/technology courses. The school has replaced traditional programs with ones that can help prepare students for the new economy in south Texas. Some new programs include hospitality, teacher education and radio/television communication.

- Hospitality program

  Because of the school's proximity to South Padre Island, a national and international tourist destination, LFHS offers a career sequence of courses for students interested in hotel/motel or restaurant management. The sequence includes a work-based learning course developed with the Sheraton Fiesta Inn Hotel Resort on South Padre Island. Students work through a rotation of all operations of a major hotel, including the restaurant, banquet services, sales, front-desk operations, accounting and housekeeping. The hotel often hires students for entry-level positions during or after their work-based learning experiences.

Changes in Graduation Requirements at Los Fresnos High School

Graduation Requirements for the Class of 1995	*Graduation Requirements for the Class of 2003*
4 units in English	4 units in English
3 units in mathematics (none designated)	3 units in mathematics (Algebra I, Algebra II and geometry)
2 units in science (at least physical science and Biology I)	3 units in science (selected from integrated physics/chemistry, college-preparatory biology, college-preparatory chemistry or college-preparatory physics)
2½ units in social studies	3½ units in social studies
½ unit in economics	½ unit in economics
1½ units in physical education	1½ units in Foundations of Personal Fitness
1 unit in health	½ unit in health
	2 units in a language other than English
	1 unit in fine arts
	½ unit in speech
	½ unit in keyboarding
	1 unit in an area of technology application
6½ units in electives (none specified)	3½ units in one of three options: a broad concentration in mathematics or science; a career/technology area; or an academic area
21 total units	***24 ½ total units***

- Teacher education

  LFHS' program for students interested in teaching includes a class called Bridging the Educational Scene for Tomorrow's Teachers (BESTT). Students are introduced to education careers by working with veteran teachers who serve as mentors. Students observe various classrooms. BESTT students adopt an elementary school class to observe for two weeks. As a final activity in the class, the BESTT students spend seven weeks teaching the elementary students under the guidance of the expert teacher. Students must prepare and carry out lessons and classroom activities.

- Radio/television communication

  The radio/television communication career program is among the most popular at Los Fresnos High School. The beginning class gives students hands-on activities in all aspects of radio and television. To complete the program students must write, produce, direct, record or film, and edit actual radio and television broadcasts for the community. They also must produce news shows and make public service presentations for the school and community. They must produce a weekly television show that is broadcast to each classroom and on the public television station. In partnership with a national broadcasting affiliate in the Rio Grande Valley, students produce and organize a series that airs each Saturday.

LFHS also is improving its career/technology offerings by arranging for students to enroll concurrently in many courses — including aircraft mechanics, energy/environmental technology, criminal justice, advertising design and auto collision repair — at Texas State Technical College. Students in such courses earn high school and college credit simultaneously.

Some career/technology teachers are changing how and what they teach. For example, since 1998 more career/technology teachers require students to use mathematics in completing assignments, require students to give weekly presentations, and require students to have their work evaluated by outside experts from their career pathway areas.

Percentages of career/technology students having experiences associated with high achievement

	1998	2000
Required to use mathematics at least weekly in completing career/technology assignments	23%	39%
Required to give class presentations at least weekly	14%	28%
Have outside experts evaluate work more than twice a year	10%	50%

Beginning to eliminate low-level classes

The percentages of students participating in the *HSTW* Assessment who completed college-preparatory ninth-grade English and college-preparatory 12th-grade English increased by five percentage points each between 1998 and 2000. There was a similar decline during that period in the percentages of students who completed general ninth-grade English and general 12th-grade English.

Percentages of students completing general English courses and college-preparatory English courses

	1998	2000
General ninth-grade English	59%	55%
College-preparatory ninth-grade English	37%	42%
General 12th-grade English	49%	46%
College-preparatory 12th-grade English	36%	41%

The percentage of students who completed low-level mathematics classes decreased by 11 percentage points, and the percentages of students who completed higher-level mathematics courses increased. The percentage of students who took algebra in the middle grades increased from 35 percent to 40 percent. The percentage of students who took at least four mathematics courses increased by six percentage points.

Percentages of students completing various mathematics courses

	1998	2000
General, basic, consumer or business mathematics	40%	29%
College-preparatory Algebra I	62%	64%
Algebra II	65%	72%
Geometry	77%	83%
Algebra in the middle grades	35%	40%
At least four mathematics courses	48%	54%

The percentage of students who completed physics increased from 39 percent in 1998 to 50 percent in 2000. Likewise, the percentage of students who took at least four science courses increased from 48 percent to 54 percent.

Percentages of students completing physics and taking at least four science courses

	1994	1998	2000
Physics	12%	39%	50%
At least four science courses	28%	48%	54%

For the 2000-01 school year LFHS increased the number of Advanced Placement courses it offers from eight to 17 in the areas of English, mathematics, biology, chemistry, history, government, art, music and Spanish. The school replaced its honors classes with AP courses because AP courses have consistent standards and externally developed exams for measuring student achievement. Any student may take Advanced Placement courses, and all students in an AP course must take the exam in that subject. LFHS pays for the tests. The AP program has grown from a few exams in 1996 to 245 exams administered in spring 2000.

Improving technology

To improve students' preparation for further learning and work, LFHS leaders set out to improve the use of technology at the school. In 1997 the school received a Technology Infrastructure Fund (TIF) grant of $250,000 from the state to supplement local funds to improve technology and bring about better performance by teachers and students. As a result the school now has 11 computer labs and 19 computer stations in the library. Each classroom has at least one computer and printer, and all computers are linked to the Internet. Selected teachers received training as technology mentor teachers to coordinate online distance learning with businesses, industries, universities and other regional, national and worldwide sources of information. Teachers received stipends, technology training, and a partial scholarship in an educational technology master's program. Technology mentors conducted a four-week Internet summer camp and incorporated the Internet into ninth- and 10th-grade courses. Because students easily can access computers, the school requires all students to take a keyboarding class, preferably by the end of the ninth grade, and to take at least one unit in a technology applications course that teaches them to work with databases, PowerPoint, Excel and Access or to do computer programming or Web page design.

Motivating students to work hard to meet high expectations

Most LFHS teachers have received extensive professional development in various techniques to motivate students to work hard. They expect students to take responsibility for their own learning by requiring them to do authentic projects, problem-solving and research and getting them to use computer technology and self-assessment. Visitors sometimes have trouble picking out the teachers because LFHS students constantly are engaged in active learning in the classroom. They know how to work in teams to solve problems and complete projects, and they are eager to teach one another

and demonstrate what they are learning. Each team member must rotate through all team responsibilities, including leader and reporter. Each group is evaluated as a whole, and each individual member also is evaluated. Assignments often require students to give presentations to the community. One student said, "Presentations are a way of life at this school." Students also must do a lot of lab work in physical science courses. They make presentations in biology and dissect cats in anatomy. In an English class, students make brochures based on a lyric poetry project and are graded on the brochure's content and appearance. In algebra, students are expected to write and are graded on their writing.

LFHS teachers are learning how to make learning personal and meaningful for their students. For example, in one English class, students read Our Town and develop a business plan for a business that could be profitable in the town. In an economics class, students must simulate the effects of the Federal Reserve on banks and on consumers. The teacher provides information on unemployment, world trade, market levels and other factors. The Federal Reserve group analyzes the data and determines how these variables should affect the prime rate. The banking groups privately go to the Federal Reserve group to determine what their lending rates will be. The rest of the class are the consumers; they apply for loans and compare the three banks' interest rates and service charges. The activity is repeated with different students in the groups and with different parameters.

LFHS leaders and teachers are committed to improving reading scores by getting students to read and write more. All teachers are required to give weekly reading and writing assignments. At least 25 percent of each major examination must require students to write essay answers.

Creating a sense of shared leadership for improving the school

The teachers play a large part in leading school improvement at LFHS. They have divided themselves into teams of about six teachers, administrators and counselors; these teams meet weekly for 90 minutes to research new practices that motivate students to learn challenging content and to determine how to use these strategies successfully. Each group selects a leader, keeps a log and discusses its progress. The teams present their findings regularly in faculty and departmental meetings. Teachers at LFHS say that this process has helped create a sense of "shared responsibility for improving student achievement."

Providing professional development

LFHS leaders and teachers believe that student achievement is related directly to teacher performance. Since the school improvement effort began in 1991-92, school and district leaders at Los Fresnos have used professional development as the major tool to help teachers learn how to improve student achievement. School leaders wrote proposals for grants from the Texas Education Agency to pay for professional-development costs and got waivers from the agency to allow them to replace instructional days with professional-development days. School leaders then revised the school calendar in 1992 to provide each faculty member with nine days of intensive professional development for each of two consecutive years; this training was led by national experts on revising curriculum and instruction and involving parents in advisement. "State funds and waivers to support professional development helped us get started," said curriculum leader Virginia Miller. "We would not have been able to do what we've done without that state support."

The training programs for LFHS teachers have focused directly on helping teachers implement the *HSTW* key practices. The training has covered the following topics: revising the curriculum to make it more challenging; incorporating reading and writing across the curriculum; effectively involving parents; giving assignments that require students to apply what they are learning; integrating academic and career/technology skills across the curriculum; adapting teaching methods to different learning styles; improving computer literacy; using the Internet in the classroom; using authentic assessment in the classroom; motivating students to learn challenging content; and teaching effectively with a block schedule.

Part of LFHS' professional development includes helping teachers see firsthand how colleges and universities and business and industry need students with strong academic skills. Teachers take part in visits and shadowing experiences in local industries. Many teachers return to school more determined to teach students to think, read and write; use mathematics; take initiative; solve problems; make decisions; and be dependable. Representatives from Texas Southmost College, University of Texas-Brownsville, Texas State Technical College and Texas State Technical Institute also visit with the LFHS faculty to discuss what students need to know and be able to do in order to undertake further learning. School leaders say, "All of these in-service experiences have guided modifications in curriculum and instruction for the purpose of better preparing students for further learning and have helped convince teachers of the need to change what they teach and how they teach."

Expanding guidance and advisement

When they began to raise graduation requirements to include an upgraded academic core and a concentration of courses in a career pathway, LFHS leaders knew that they would have to improve their guidance and advisement system. In 1997 they decided to create a teacher-adviser program. Each teacher serves as a teacher "advocate" for 15 students throughout all four years of high school. Each teacher presents each student with advisory "lessons" 13 times a year. In addition to helping students understand the graduation requirements and the importance of planning for further study, the lessons address respect, honesty, perseverance, caring, responsibility, citizenship and justice. Teacher advocates use the sessions to provide students with information that can help increase attendance, increase graduation rates, encourage them to stay in school and decrease disciplinary referrals.

LFHS holds a freshmen orientation each year before the start of school. The effort, sponsored by the Student Council, enables incoming ninth-graders and their parents to talk with administrators, counselors and teachers about graduation requirements, school and classroom expectations, goals, school rules and students' opportunities at school.

Counselors and teachers host an annual career week, during which representatives from business, industry, the military and governmental agencies set up booths and demonstrations to inform students about career possibilities. LFHS provides a similar program for LFHS graduates and representatives of colleges and universities to speak to students and their parents about planning for further study.

The school also hosts an all-day career fair during the summer to give students a chance to learn more about careers that interest them. Guest speakers help students plan for the future. Participants represent many fields: construction, accounting, law, communication equipment and electronics, government, education, manufacturing, retail, computers, transportation, small businesses, banking,

food preparation, engineering/architecture/drafting, medicine and social work. College and university representatives also are on hand to assist students with planning for further study.

Academic guidance begins before students reach high school. Middle grades counselors assess students' interests and aptitude. Counselors in the middle grades and high school work together to review the results with students to help them identify career pathways that may interest them. High school counselors spend several days each year meeting with the parents of eighth-grade students to share information about the results of the interest and aptitude assessments and to help them and their children develop programs of high school study.

The high school counselors also remain at school until 7 p.m. each Monday to meet with parents to develop or review their children's plans of high school study. The school hosts several back-to-school nights for parents and students to meet with teachers and counselors to review students' programs of study. Teachers call the parents or guardians of all the students in their advocacy groups to invite them to the back-to-school nights. Counselors hold sessions in Spanish and English to inform parents of the courses that students need to take to prepare them for further learning. Teachers meet with parents in round-table sessions to describe what they expect of students in their courses; they also give parents ideas on how they can help their children strive toward high expectations. School and guidance leaders arrange a job-shadowing program for 10th-graders in their chosen career areas. In 1995-96, 30 students participated in the program; in 1999-2000 there were 96 participants. The goal for 2000-01 is to get at least 80 percent of 10th-graders to participate. LFHS also shows career awareness videos on the school's television system every Wednesday.

The school's emphasis on advisement is making a difference. On the *HSTW* Assessment, the percentage of seniors in career/technology programs who indicated that they planned to pursue further study increased from 65 percent in 1996 to 80 percent in 2000. Also during that period, the percentage of seniors who indicated that they received help in planning before ninth grade increased from 10 percent in 1996 to 27 percent in 2000.

Creating a ninth-grade transition program

After receiving a grant from the state to help develop a ninth-grade transition program in early 2000, a team of middle grades and high school teachers developed a plan to help at-risk students entering ninth grade. High school leaders use information from middle grades teachers — including student scores on standardized tests and data on course failures — to identify eighth-graders who are likely to have difficulty in college-preparatory courses in ninth grade. These students are scheduled to take classes with selected teachers and receive individual counseling and extra help in academic courses. Students also may receive computer-assisted help in ninth-grade English and Algebra I. The program is intended to prevent students who have only the barest skills from failing and dropping out and to help them complete coursework required for further learning. LFHS also offers a Saturday academy for low-performing ninth-graders.

Progress in getting students to meet high standards

LFHS students' achievement in reading, mathematics and science has improved, as demonstrated by various measures. Fewer students are dropping out. More students are entering college, and fewer need remedial courses. More students are completing a challenging high school curriculum.

Improvement in overall achievement

The percentages of LFHS students who pass the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills exams in reading, writing and mathematics the first time they take them increased between 1993-94 and 1999-2000.

Percentages of 10th-grade students passing the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test

School Year	Reading	Writing	Math	All Tests
1993-94	64%	74%	40%	37%
1994-95	65%	84%	49%	42%
1995-96	79%	87%	75%	64%
1996-97	85%	90%	83%	76%
1997-98	89%	91%	89%	82%
1998-99	89%	91%	92%	83%
1999-2000	91%	96%	94%	88%

At the end of 1999-2000, the Texas Education Agency recognized LFHS as "exemplary," the highest of four categories that the state uses to describe public schools and districts. The ratings are based on 31 indicators of school performance that include various test scores (TAAS, college admissions tests, Texas' postsecondary placement test, state end-of-course tests); dropout rates; attendance rates; percentages of students who complete the recommended high school program; improvement in reading and mathematics; academic improvement of students who fail courses; and participation rates and passing rates on AP exams. Recognition as an "exemplary" school was especially sweet because the state requires that the performance of all subgroups — including special-needs populations — be calculated in the percentage of students who pass the TAAS tests. The superintendent attributed LFHS' success to having the same high expectations for all students in all programs.

Between 1993 and 2000, the percentages of Los Fresnos students who participated in the *HSTW* Assessment and met the *HSTW* performance goals increased by 34 percentage points in reading, 27 percentage points in mathematics and 23 percentage points in science.

Percentages of students meeting the *HSTW* goals in reading, mathematics and science

	Met *HSTW* performance goal	
	1993	2000
Reading	30%	64%
Mathematics	50%	77%
Science	32%	55%

Average scores on the *HSTW* Assessment were above the *HSTW* performance goals in reading, mathematics and science in both 1998 and 2000; in 1994, the average scores were below the performance goals.

HSTW goals and average _HSTW_ Assessment scores

	HSTW goal	1994	1996	1998	2000
Reading	279	267	277	290	287
Mathematics	295	293	307	312	312
Science	292	282	285	297	296

The percentage of students who scored below the basic reading level decreased from 17 percent in 1998 to 13 percent in 2000, compared with 32 percent at all *HSTW* sites in 2000. The percentage of students who scored below the basic level in science decreased from 2 percent in 1998 to zero in 2000, compared with 6 percent at all *HSTW* sites in 2000.

More students planning for college

The percentage of career/technology students planning to attend four-year colleges or universities increased from 40 percent in 1994 to 65 percent in 2000. Students' average mathematics score on the SAT increased from 436 in 1995-96 to 478 in 1999-2000, even though the number of students taking the SAT increased from 50 to 100 during that period. As a result of an increased number of students preparing for further study and taking the SAT, total scholarship awards to LFHS students increased. Graduates in 2000 received $2,206,373 in scholarships, compared with $362,356 for graduates in 1997.

Improved attendance

The attendance rate increased from 92 percent in 1993-94 to 96 percent in 1998-99.

Attendance rates from 1993-94 to 1998-99

	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99
Attendance rate	92%	96%	96%	95%	95%	96%

High percentage of LFHS students qualifying for "Texas Scholar"[1] status

Seventy-one percent of LFHS students qualified to be "Texas Scholars" in 2000. To qualify, these students had to complete the current requirements for all 2003 LFHS graduates. The percentage of LFHS students who completed such a program increased from 54 percent in 1997 to 71 percent in 2000.

Percentages of students earning various high school diplomas, 1997 to 2000

	1997	1998	1999	2000
Graduated as a Texas Scholar	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	71%
Graduated under LFHS recommended plan	54%	65%	70%	71%
Graduated under minimum plan	46%	35%	30%	29%

Lessons learned

All students, regardless of their backgrounds, can meet high achievement standards. School leaders say that the *HSTW* key practices work in increasing student achievement. Teachers, who are the key to raising expectations and getting students to meet them, cite professional development as the most important resource in their effort. As a result of professional development, most teachers use real-world examples, class projects and cooperative learning.

Plans for the future

To continue improving student achievement, Los Fresnos has planned:

- to get all students to take four mathematics courses and four science courses;
- to encourage more students to participate in extra help programs.
- to bring together English teachers from grades six through 12 to develop ways to raise expectations at every grade level; and
- to provide professional development to help career/technology teachers revise their course syllabi in ways that get more students to use challenging academic skills in completing assignments.

[1] A Texas Scholar is a student who has met the following minimum requirements: four units in English; three units in mathematics, including Algebra I, Algebra II and geometry; three units in science chosen from three areas (integrated physics and chemistry; biology, AP biology, or International Baccalaureate; chemistry; and physics, Principles of Technology, AP physics, or International Baccalaureate physics); 3½ units in social studies; one-half unit in economics; two units in a language other than English; one-half unit in health; one unit in fine arts; 1½ units in physical education; one unit in technology applications; one-half unit in speech; and 2½ units in higher-level mathematics, science and an elective area or 3½ units in a career/technology or academic area.

District support

The school's effort required cooperation from the school district in order to succeed.

- The school district approved raising graduation requirements beyond the state's minimum standards.
- The school district worked with school leaders to upgrade and expand the career/technology offerings.
- The school district provided local funds for professional development.

State policies that support Los Fresnos' improvement efforts

Several state policies and resources played important roles in Los Fresnos' improvement plan:

- statewide conferences for school representatives to learn from one another and resources for them to attend workshops presented by national experts in school improvement;
- a system that recognizes and rewards ($5,000 for "exemplary" schools) schools that get students to meet high performance standards as measured by the state accountability system;
- mentor sites for sites that are beginning school improvement efforts;
- state content standards in all areas (through the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) that are linked to required state exams and that give teachers and students clear ideas of what they need to teach and learn;
- a mandatory state graduation test and end-of-course tests that give schools public support for raising expectations of students and that hold schools accountable for getting students to meet high standards;
- an accountability system that measures school performance on 31 indicators and gives schools a way to measure themselves;
- various funds, including grants to help schools improve the transition from the middle grades to high school, the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund to improve telecommunications technology, and the Carl Perkins and Tech Prep funds to support professional development for school improvement; and
- the alignment of academic content in career/technology courses to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards.

Further state help needed

In order for Los Fresnos to sustain school improvement and to make further strides, the state needs to take the following actions:

- Make the academic standards for English as clear as those for mathematics. The state should specify that all students in language arts must read 10 to 15 books annually, must complete at least one

writing assignment of one to three pages weekly, must give oral presentations and must complete a major research paper annually.

- Continue providing funds for professional development, including travel costs, which can impede attendance at state conferences, particularly in such a large state.
- Require students to pass state technical-literacy exams in career/technology areas.

How SREB has helped Los Fresnos

Los Fresnos High School was one of the original *HSTW* sites in Texas and has participated in *HSTW* since 1993. School leaders indicate that involvement in *HSTW* has helped them by:

- enabling school leaders and staff to participate in a large network of schools from which they can learn a great deal;
- helping the school focus on improving academic achievement and performance on required state exams;
- providing a framework for getting academic and career/technology teachers to work together to develop challenging assignments;
- providing professional-development resources that include an annual conference and a list of national experts to run workshops at the school;
- enabling the school to receive technical assistance visits from SREB that include useful recommendations from objective experts on how to improve and whom to contact for assistance; and
- providing an assessment system that gives leaders and teachers information that links teaching practices at the school to student achievement.

Summary

Students and teachers at Los Fresnos High School have beaten the odds to make LFHS a high-performing school. Unfailing belief that all students can meet high achievement standards, hard work, willingness to stick to a dream over eight years and the state's strong accountability system have enabled this high school to move from the bottom of the heap to the top. Administrators, teachers and students at LFHS work very well together toward a common goal: improving student achievement. It is no surprise that the U.S. Department of Education named LFHS a "New American High School" in November 2000.

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